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The Catholic Church and Desegregation in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, 1961-1976

By MARK NEWMAN

The Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, erected in July 1961 as the civil rights movement escalated, grappled with the problem of desegregating its institutions in line with the Church's teachings against racial discrimination, while simultaneously trying not to alienate the many white Catholics who preferred segregation. Robert E. Tracy, bishop from 1961 until 1974, sought to educate his diocese's white Catholics to accept desegregation of diocesan and secular institutions, while following a gradualist path closely tied to the pace of secular change. Although African American Catholics opposed racial discrimination in Catholic institutions as much as they did in the secular world, many objected that too often Catholic desegregation came at the expense of black Catholic schools and churches. Increasingly, they pressured the diocese to maintain black Catholic institutions as centers of African American community and culture, while many white Catholics remained reluctant to live among or to attend churches or parochial schools with blacks. When Bishop Tracy resigned in 1974, his successor, Bishop Joseph V. Sullivan, found that African American and white Catholics remained largely separate,

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despite the diocese's long-standing efforts to bring them together.¹

When the Catholic Church established the Diocese of Baton Rouge, 142,388 people, or 29.1 percent, out of the 489,731 total population within the diocese's boundaries were Catholic. Only 14,963 of the 180,934 African Americans inside the diocesan borders were members of the faith, compared to 127,425 whites or 41.3 percent of the total white population. The bulk of the black Catholic population lived in East Baton Rouge, Ascension, St. James, and Assumption parishes. As had long been the practice before the new diocese had been carved out of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, most African American and white Catholics attended separate churches and schools, although, officially, churches were open to all. Although whites were members of territorial parishes, most African Americans belonged to special parishes, specifically designated for them and usually served by religious orders, such as the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and the Society of St. Joseph or Josephites, rather than by diocesan priests.²

Although generally observed, separation was not absolute. In Maringouin, African Americans and whites attended mass together but sat on opposite sides of the church. In some predominantly white churches, blacks sat at pews reserved for them at the back. In 1960, Fr. Aubry Osborn, a black SVD priest from New Orleans, became pastor of St. Paul's Parish on the outskirts of Baton Rouge. According to Catholic activist Dorothy Day,

¹"Diocese of Baton Rouge," accessed October 10, 2004, at <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dbato.html>.

²"A Syllabus On Racial Justice," n.d., 12, 15, "Fr. Powell named to Rome post," *Clarion Herald*, press clipping dated September 25, 1969, box 6, folder 11, series 33, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisc., hereafter cited as NCICJR; "The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," in "The Record of the Diocese Of Baton Rouge in work for The Negro In The Community 1961-1968," Series Title "Historical Vertical File," File Title "Racial Justice - Tracy," box location "Vertical File," Archives Department, Diocese of Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge, La., hereafter cited as Historical Vertical File; "Our Negro and Indian Missions," January 1966, 7, Saint Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart, Josephite Archives, Baltimore, Md., hereafter cited as Josephite Archives.

Osborn's appointment made St. Paul's "the first integrated parish under a Negro pastor."³

It would fall to incoming bishop Robert Tracy to decide the future of desegregation within the diocese. Named the diocese's first bishop in August 1961 at the age of fifty-one, Tracy had been born and raised a Catholic in New Orleans. He had spent his life in Louisiana, arriving as Baton Rouge's bishop after serving two years as the Diocese of Lafayette's auxiliary bishop, preceded by twelve years in Baton Rouge as chaplain at Louisiana State University's Catholic Student Center. Tracy revealed little about his personal reflections and did not leave a diary, making his private thoughts hard to discern. His actions demonstrated that he respected the Catholic hierarchy above him and expected those below him, be they diocesan officials, clergy, or laity, to follow his lead and obey his instructions. Nevertheless, he was acutely aware that many, if not most, white Catholics, like other whites in the diocese, favored segregation. Although committed to desegregation, Tracy trod cautiously, unwilling to divide Catholics and harm the Church by taking precipitate action.⁴

A few months prior to the diocese's creation, Henry A. Cabirac, Jr., executive director of the Archdiocese of New Orleans's newly formed biracial Catholic Council on Human Relations (CCHR), had requested that council members ask local priests how the council might foster improved race relations in their parishes. Reports from the Baton Rouge area indicated that most priests favored an educative program of sermons, but they frequently noted segregationist sympathies among many white parishioners. Some of the pastors counseled against action that would crystallize opposition, such as desegregating schools, before an educative program had first been undertaken.⁵

³Fr. Gerald M. LeFebvre, interview by author, November 10, 2006, Baton Rouge, La.; Dorothy Day, "Southern Pilgrimage," *Commonweal*, 74 (March 31, 1961), 11-2 (quotation on p. 12); John E. Rousseau, "Negro Priest Ordained at St. Louis Cathedral," *Our Colored Missions*, 39 (September 1953), 141.

⁴"His Excellency The Most Reverend Robert Emmet Tracy, D.D., L.L.D. Bishop of Baton Rouge Biographical Sketch," and Robert E. Tracy to "Dear Member of our Baton Rouge Diocese," July 1, 1962, Historical Vertical File.

⁵"Council on Human Relations Is Seen As 'Holy Crusade,'" *Catholic Action of the South*, April 2, 1961; Bob to "Dear Pap," April 29, 1961, J. D. De Blieux to Henry Cabirac, Jr., May 1, 1961, Herman Schluter, Jr., to Henry Cabirac, Jr., May 1, 1961, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR Henry Cabirac, Jr., to John J. McNamara, May 31, 1962, box 6, folder 12, *ibid.*; Adam Fairclough, *Race and*

A report on Father Abadie, pastor of Baton Rouge's St. Gerard Church, noted "Father says that many of the parishioners have very strong emotions on the subject. He has just conducted a drive up there and many have told him that if the [parochial] school was integrated that they would not pay the balance of their pledge. Most of them want to avoid all discussion of the subject matter." While Fr. Daniel Becnel, pastor of Baton Rouge's St. Aloysius Church, acknowledged significant Catholic opposition to parochial school desegregation, he regarded such desegregation as a prerequisite for changing Catholic attitudes, rather than as a reason for inaction. The report on Becnel indicated his belief that "Once Negroes are being admitted to these [white parochial] schools it will be possible to confront the segregationist Catholics with the moral necessity of living up to the Church's teaching." Even so, Becnel advocated gradualism in tackling segregation in diocesan institutions. His interviewer noted:

Father Becnel is all for opening parish organizations to the negroes, but believes that at the present time it would be best not to attempt this except in very small organizations, such as the parish confraternity board, where all the members are more likely to be in accord with the Church's teaching and really want to see it put into effect. There would be too much opposition, in all probability, in the organizations with less selective memberships.⁶

Having spent his life in Louisiana, including many years in the city of Baton Rouge, Tracy well understood white lay sentiment toward segregation, but he was also committed to inculcating the Church's teaching on race relations. After his installation as bishop in November 1961, Tracy told a press conference that he fully supported the statement "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience," issued on behalf of the U. S. bishops three years before. The statement condemned racial discrimination and legal segregation, and it called for their gradual elimination to allow

Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972 (Athens, Ga., 1995), 256.

⁶J. D. De Blieux to Henry Cabirac, Jr., May 1, 1961 (first quotation), Bob to "Dear Pap," April 29, 1961 (second and third quotations), box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCLJR.

for adjustment to change. Tracy adopted this approach as his own during the first years of his prelacy in Baton Rouge.⁷

In correspondence with Tracy, Cabirac may well have confirmed the bishop's understanding of lay sentiment by drawing on the reports that the CCHR had gathered earlier in the year. Tracy wrote to Cabirac, "I am interested in your work and that of your associates on the Council and...I plan to cooperate with you in every way possible in the future."⁸

Tracy had reason to be cautious about desegregating parochial schools. He was well aware that in 1955 Joseph F. Rummel, Archbishop of New Orleans, had announced his intention to desegregate parochial schools but then repeatedly postponed action because of strong white lay Catholic opposition. Tracy also knew that federal court-ordered desegregation of the first grade of elementary public schools in New Orleans in November 1960 had brought a white boycott of the two formerly white schools that had enrolled blacks. But after further token public school desegregation occurred peacefully in September 1961, and under pressure from the CCHR, Rummel announced in March 1962 that the archdiocese's schools would desegregate in September.⁹

Cabirac strongly favored desegregation of parochial schools and other diocesan institutions. Rummel's decision offered a precedent that Cabirac hoped Tracy would follow. Although Tracy had privately urged Rummel to delay desegregation until 1963, Cabirac felt encouraged when Tracy issued a pastoral letter supporting Rummel's school desegregation order that was read by priests in all of the diocese's churches on March 30, 1962. Tracy told Catholics that Rummel's action was in accord with Catholic teachings, and he noted that Pope John XXIII had recently said that "the Church knows no bar of race or color." Tracy praised "the nobility of Archbishop Rummel's stand, based as it is on respect for the laws of God and country." However, Tracy wrote that he had "no plans or announcements" about his diocese's parochial schools "Because the Diocese of Baton Rouge is still in

⁷"A Syllabus On Racial Justice," n.d., 15, 23-5, *ibid.*

⁸Robert E. Tracy to Henry Cabirac, Jr., November 22, 1961, *ibid.*

⁹James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York, 1962), 229-46; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 172, 177-79, 234-58; "School Rolls Are Open to All Catholics," *Catholic Action*, April 1, 1962. In March 1962, twelve African American children attended six formerly white public schools in New Orleans. *New York Times*, April 4, 1962.

the early stages of organizing the various departments of its Christian life including its Catholic school system." Nevertheless, the diocese was committed "to the same teaching on justice and love to all men, our brothers in Christ, as Catholics in any other part of the world."¹⁰

Although he was cautious, Tracy certainly did not lack courage or determination, and he sometimes took unpublicized actions against segregation. Fr. Gerald M. LeFebvre, then associate pastor at St. Mary's, the white Catholic Church in New Roads, recalled that Tracy closed a mission for African Americans in Morganza and moved it to St. Mary's because he wanted the church to have some black Catholics. When the bishop ordered that blacks should be confirmed at St. Mary's, a bomb threat occurred. Tracy responded that it was a "wonderful place to be bombed in" and attended the confirmations which went ahead without incident.¹¹

On another occasion, Tracy learned that white restaurants in the city of Baton Rouge would not serve a clergy banquet because of Father Osborn's inclusion. Tracy moved the banquet to the diocesan offices, and he later ordered kitchens built there big enough to service large gatherings. His priests remember the bishop as dynamic, proactive, and a great leader. Tracy, for his part, expected Catholics to respect and obey his authority.¹²

Consequently, Cabirac followed a two-fold approach toward the Diocese of Baton Rouge. He secretly encouraged African American and white Catholics to urge Tracy to desegregate, while providing the bishop with advice about tackling racism and discrimination. In April 1962, Cabirac learned that the only Catholic high school for blacks in the city of Baton Rouge had been closed to make way for a highway. He wrote to Dr. B. V. Baranco, Jr., a local black Catholic and CCHR member, that while the school's closure was unfortunate, it provided an opportunity for him and others to ask Tracy to desegregate white parochial high schools so that black children would not be deprived of a Catholic high school education. Tracy could,

¹⁰Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 258; "Bishop Praises Stand By Archbishop Rummel," *Catholic Action*, April 8, 1962 (quotations); "A Syllabus On Racial Justice," n.d., 15, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

¹¹LeFebvre interview.

¹²Ibid.; Msgr. William L. Greene, interview by author, November 10, 2006, Baton Rouge.

Cabirac noted, present such action to critics as a matter of Catholic education, rather than desegregation. Cabirac concluded by writing, "Please keep my letter confidential as it would be detrimental to our cause to let Bishop Tracy know that I am trying to encourage you to do this." Cabirac understood that Tracy would respond negatively to any perceived challenges to his authority, especially from someone outside his diocese.¹³

Three weeks later Cabirac wrote to Tracy after learning from Msgr. Charles J. Plauche, CCHR chaplain and chancellor of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, that Tracy planned to mail a copy of "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience" to every family in the diocese. Cabirac explained that the CCHR had planned such a mailing in 1961 but then abandoned the idea after "we spoke to some of the top resource people in our area to determine what steps we should take and their recommendation was by all means not to do this as it would probably crystallize the opposition." Tracy, always his own man, rejected the advice, leaving Cabirac to reply soothingly that he would like copies for the CCHR of material that Tracy distributed, "Believing that it is always possible to improve the materials we use."¹⁴

Prompted by Cabirac and Plauche, some Catholics wrote to Tracy asking him to follow Rummel's example by ordering parochial school desegregation. Tracy did not issue an order, but he indicated that he would prepare the diocese for eventual parochial school desegregation. Wade Mackie, who headed the American Friends Service Committee's Baton Rouge office, reported to Cabirac in May 1962:

The [Archdiocese of New Orleans] desegregation order of parochial schools has had a wholesome effect in Baton Rouge, I believe. Prior to the order, there were many Catholics who were speaking as segregationists in an honest belief that the actual desegregation order would never come through in New Orleans or anywhere else in the State. I think Bishop Tracy has succeeded in getting the idea accross [*sic*] that even though

¹³Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Dr. B. V. Baranco, Jr., April 2, 1962 (quotation), box 6, folder 12, series 33, NCCIJR, "Council on Human Relations," *Catholic Action*, April 2, 1961.

¹⁴Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 256; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Robert E. Tracy, April 25, 1962 (first quotation), May 18, 1962 (second quotation), box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

parochial schools here were not included along with New Orleans, that this is simply to allow time for real preparation.¹⁵

In July 1962, Tracy sent a letter to the diocese's forty thousand Catholic families in which he appealed "for loyalty and prayerful understanding as we all move forward to a more and more Christ-like attitude on the matter of human relations and racial justice." He reminded Catholics of the bishop's duty to lead and "instruct them in these moral matters and to administer the Church of God, even when it places a sore trial on their private feelings." To explain the Catholic Church's teaching on race, Tracy enclosed a copy of "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience."¹⁶

Tracy also included a copy of a twenty-four-page pamphlet, *Let's Talk Sense About The Negro*, by a white Lafayette-born Jesuit priest, Clement J. McNaspy. The pamphlet summarized the origins and history of segregation; explained why it was morally wrong and biblically indefensible; refuted racist arguments asserting innate African American inferiority; and defended the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling against segregated public schools. McNaspy also summarized Catholic teachings against segregation and turned segregationist arguments that Communism lay behind the civil rights movement on their head by arguing that American racism aided Communist propaganda, while segregationists adopted "the totalitarian technique" of trying to stifle dissent and impose conformity of opinion. In his accompanying letter, Tracy reaffirmed that "we have no [desegregation] plans at this time regarding the schools under our jurisdiction," but he told Catholics that the materials he had enclosed were designed "to prepare us for the Christian work of justice and charity that lies ahead of us."¹⁷

¹⁵A. W. English to Robert Emmet Tracy, May 4, 1962, Wade Mackie to Henry Cabirac, Jr., May 25, 1962 (quotation), Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Wade Mackie, May 31, 1962, box 6, folder 10, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Charles Daunis, May 14, 1962, box 6, folder 12, *ibid*.

¹⁶Robert E. Tracy to "Dear Member of our Baton Rouge Diocese," July 1, 1962 (quotations), Historical Vertical File; "Bishop Tracy's Notebook," *Catholic Commentator*, June 14, 1963.

¹⁷C. J. McNaspy, S. J., *Let's Talk Sense About The Negro* (Chicago, 1968 [1961]), 1-24 (first quotation on p. 23); "Bishop Tracy's Notebook," *Commentator*, June 14, 1963; Robert E. Tracy to "Dear Member of our Baton Rouge Diocese," July 1, 1962 (second and third quotations), Historical Vertical File.

Having signaled his gradualist intentions, Tracy found himself caught between diocesan advisers who urged him to delay parochial school desegregation and some African American Catholics who, encouraged by Cabirac and Mackie, pressured him to order it. Cabirac wrote to Mackie in August 1962:

You must remember that attempts are being made to condition Bishop Tracy not to do this thing for a long time and therefore we must do as much as possible to offset this. Although Bishop Tracy might resent to some extent letters from Catholic Negroes asking for admittance to schools. . . he will to some extent welcome such letters because he will be able to show them to his consultors and other trusted advisors and indicate to them that there are Catholic Negroes who are not satisfied with the present conditions and want admittance to Catholic schools. The key to this whole thing is that these respectful complaints must be submitted on the quiet to reduce the possibility of tipping off those who are opposed to this.

Cabirac also urged J. D. De Blieux, a Baton Rouge State Senator, CCHR member, and chairman of the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, to encourage Tracy to desegregate parochial schools. However, Tracy told Bishop Francis F. Reh of Charleston that he did not see why he should act ahead of the public schools, which remained segregated in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.¹⁸

Relations between Tracy and Cabirac cooled. In May 1963, Cabirac wrote to Tracy that, in view of high racial tensions in Baton Rouge, he had no intention of trying to initiate a Catholic Interracial Council (CIC) in the city. Cabirac had been appointed director of the Southern Field Service of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice (NCCIJ), an unofficial group based in Chicago that represented and encouraged the growth of CICs and provided race relations guidance to prelates. Tracy may have become aware of Cabirac's secret maneuvers, or he may have harbored suspicion of lay interracial groups since Herman

¹⁸Henry Cabirac, Jr., to Wade Mackie, August 2, 1962 (quotation), box 6, folder 10, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry [Cabirac, Jr.] to J. D. De Blieux, October 3, 1962, box 6, folder 12, *ibid.*; J. D. De Blieux to "Dear Sir," March 16, 1961, box 21, folder 7, Louis J. Twomey Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University Library, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, La.; "Louisiana 1961 Report to the Commission on Civil Rights from the State Advisory Committee," 189, box 84, folder 7, *ibid.*; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 335.

Schluter, Jr., a CCHR director from Baton Rouge, had tried unsuccessfully to organize one in the new diocese soon after Tracy's arrival without consulting him.¹⁹

The southern civil rights movement reached a peak of activity in 1963, beginning with the Birmingham, Alabama, campaign that gained national and international attention after local authorities used dogs and fire hoses against protesters. Local authorities in the city of Baton Rouge wanted to avoid similar scenes. Mackie was instrumental in helping to establish an official biracial committee, the state's first, in the city on May 29, 1963.²⁰

Tracy addressed the racial situation in his June 14, 1963, column in the *Catholic Commentator*, a new weekly newspaper sent to every Catholic family in the diocese. The bishop acknowledged rising tensions and the formation of the biracial committee. He reminded readers of Catholic teachings on race and his earlier pronouncements on the issue. Thus far, he explained, "In view of our condition as a new Diocese and in view too of the powerful emotions at work and the long traditions to be dealt with, sensible advance all along the line, without inducing more harm than good, has been our policy." Tracy looked to the Bible for guidance on racial problems. The bishop declared that, in dealing with others, Catholics should follow St. Paul's admonition: "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus [Philippians 2:5]." Jesus, Tracy reminded his readers, had told the Apostles "A new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another as I have loved you [St. John 13:34]." The bishop cited Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan [St. Luke 10:29-37] to argue that Jesus would have aided "the Negro to achieve freedom," contending that "surely the Negro in the United States is the man who fell among robbers." Tracy warned that "extremists" sought to preserve discrimination, but he argued for

¹⁹Henry Cabirac to Robert E. Tracy, May 31, 1963, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR; memorandum, Jack Sisson to Matt Ahmann, "Visit to Baton Rouge, May 30, 1964," June 1, 1964, box 3, folder 10, series 11, *ibid.*; "Council on Human Relations," *Catholic Action*, April 2, 1961.

²⁰Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 332-33.

gradual change to allow adjustment to "traditions of long standing" and advocated a "steady, progressive march to full justice."²¹

In June 1963, Pres. John F. Kennedy proposed a civil rights bill that would outlaw segregation in public accommodations. Layman A. J. Frederic, Jr., of Litcher wrote to the *Catholic Commentator* praising Kennedy's announcement "as the greatest speech I have ever heard by an American President." Frederic called on Americans to support "our President, the constitution and the laws of their great democracy."²²

The diocesan paper used the Fourth of July independence celebration to remind readers that there were parts of the United States where African Americans were "still by law or practice a veritable pariah, an alien, discriminated against, segregated and disfranchised, Constitution or no Constitution." Its editorial compared the contemporary black struggle against oppression with that of the patriots against the British two centuries earlier and maintained that too few non-blacks were lending their support. Supportive of civil rights legislation, the paper also called for recognition of "the Christian concept of the dignity of man."²³

In July 1963, a federal judge ordered the twelfth grades of East Baton Rouge Parish public schools desegregated as part of a grade-a-year desegregation plan. The next week, Tracy issued a pastoral letter to be read by priests in all the diocese's churches announcing that the eleventh and twelfth grades of four white Catholic high schools in East Baton Rouge Parish would desegregate in September 1964. The bishop explained that the federal ruling had come too late for the diocese to adopt the same plan, but he noted that both public and parochial schools in East Baton Rouge Parish would be pursuing the same policy by September 1964. While the public schools placed barriers such as psychological suitability in the way of black applicants to white schools, Catholic high schools in East Baton Rouge Parish would only consider educational qualifications. East Baton Rouge was only

²¹"Bishop Tracy's Notebook," *Commentator*, June 14, 1963 (quotations); Robert E. Tracy, "Full Text of Bishop Tracy's Pastoral on Racial Justice," *Commentator*, May 28, 1965.

²²A. J. Frederic, Jr., to the *Commentator*, June 28, 1963.

²³Father Naughton, "Let Freedom Ring?," *Commentator*, July 5, 1963. Emphasis in the original.

one of twelve parishes within the Diocese of Baton Rouge and so Catholic school segregation remained largely intact. Tracy signaled his intention to desegregate all Catholic institutions in the diocese, however, although he did not give a timetable.²⁴

Cabirac expressed his "tremendous disappointment" in Tracy's decision to Clarence Laws, head of the Southwest Regional Office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Cabirac wrote to Laws:

Not only did he [Tracy] go back on his word to open the Catholic schools at the same time as the public schools, but it appears that he will use the grade-a-year plan.

I have contacted Dr. B. V. Baranco and asked him to do whatever he could to get the Catholic negro community to protest to Bishop Tracy.

Whether he was aware of Cabirac's action or not, Tracy continued to refuse to participate in NCCIJ events, such as a planned Leadership Conference in Atlanta for southern prelates and their officials.²⁵

As East Baton Rouge Parish prepared to admit twenty-eight African Americans to formerly white public schools in the fall of 1963, Tracy issued a pastoral letter appealing "to all members of our Catholic family to provide right-minded leadership in the community." He urged Catholics "to be faithful to our religious principles, our concept of human dignity and our respect for the law and order of the land." Public school desegregation occurred peacefully, helped by similar pleas by other religious and civic leaders.²⁶

In October 1963, Tracy addressed racial issues once more when he spoke on behalf of the U. S. Catholic hierarchy at the Second Vatican Council in Rome, attended by 2,600 prelates from around the world. He asked that a proposed section in the Council's chapter on "The People of God," which read "there is no inequality

²⁴"64 School Mix Set In Diocese," press clipping, dated July 29, 1963, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR; Robert E. Tracy, "High Schools In East Baton Rouge Parish," *Commentator*, August 2, 1963.

²⁵Henry Cabirac to Clarence Laws, July 30, 1963 (quotations), box 6, folder 12, series 33, NCCIJR; Henry Cabirac to Robert E. Tracy, July 30, 1963, Robert E. Tracy to Henry Cabirac, August 1, 1963, box 6, folder 11, *ibid*.

²⁶"Bishop Asks Cooperation In Desegregation," *Guardian*, September 6, 1963 (quotation); Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 322.

in Christ or in the Church arising from nationality, sex or social condition," be amended to include race. Tracy believed an explicit reference to race would reinforce the U. S. bishops' 1958 statement against segregation and their August 1963 pastoral letter urging Catholics to become personally involved in the struggle for racial justice. Before speaking at the Council, Tracy secured the written support of 147 of the 178 U. S. prelates present in Rome. The remaining thirty-one prelates had not been present at the meeting when U. S. Catholic leaders discussed Tracy's proposal. The Council responded to Tracy's speech with "generous applause" and added race to the text.²⁷

Tracy's intervention garnered favorable front page exposure from leading national and international newspapers but only limited coverage in Baton Rouge. Two days after Tracy's address, a Louisiana segregationist group called Parents and Friends of Catholic Children broadcast a radio message criticizing the bishop for inconsistency:

For the sake of truth, we are letting all people know that we resent and deplore the actions now taking place within the hierarchy. Only last year Bishop Tracy procrastinated in integrating the Baton Rouge diocese because he thought the time wasn't right. If he is so against segregation, how can he postpone taking action against what he considers sin.

Tracy, however, took the view that an education program and gradual desegregation were the best ways of preparing Catholics to accept full desegregation of Catholic institutions.²⁸

On November 4, 1963, at Tracy's instruction, the Diocesan School Board Office issued "A Syllabus on Racial Justice" to further the diocese's efforts to provide Catholics with moral guidance on race relations. The syllabus provided detailed advice

²⁷"Pastoral Letter on Council Is Issued by Bishop Tracy," *Catholic Action*, September 23, 1962; Robert E. Tracy, *American Bishop at the Vatican Council: Recollections and Reflections*, 129-38 (first quotation on p. 130; second quotation on p. 136), ""Historical Vertical File; *Shreveport Times*, October 25, 1963; "Bishops Issue Racial Harmony Statement," and "Text of U.S. Bishops' Statement on Racial Harmony," *Commentator*, August 23, 1963.

²⁸*New York Times*, October 25, 1963; Tracy, *American Bishop at the Vatican Council*, 135-36, ""Historical Vertical File; quoted from text attached to Henry Cabirac to Charles J. Plauche, October 30, 1963, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

for those teaching grades seven through twelve in Catholic schools; bibliographies; the text of the U. S. bishops' 1958 and 1963 statements on race; Tracy's June 1963 statement in the *Catholic Commentator*; and a Labor Day 1963 statement by George C. Higgins, director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, calling for equal employment opportunity. Although the Diocesan School Board Office instructed all Catholic schools to use the syllabus, a lay Catholic teacher later told the NCCIJ that the syllabus was not used by teachers other than for background information, resulting in no units being taught specifically on human relations. It is not clear whether this teacher's experience was typical.²⁹

The diocese continued to make incremental progress toward desegregation. The Baton Rouge biracial committee urged two of the city's major hospitals, Baton Rouge General and Our Lady of the Lake, the latter a Catholic institution, to permit African American doctors to practice. In April 1964, the two hospitals issued a statement announcing the new policy. However, black doctors were to be allowed to treat black patients only. The dual announcement by the two hospitals was consistent with Tracy's policy of seeking to act in line with secular change. When Tracy also learned that Fr. Elmer S. Powell, the African American SVD priest for St. Paul Parish, was planning to go to Houston, Texas, for medical care because of the poor quality of facilities reserved for blacks in the basement of Our Lady of the Lake Hospital, the bishop ordered that these facilities be made equal to those serving white patients, although segregation itself remained in place.³⁰

Cabirac, and his successor John P. Sisson, continued to monitor the situation in the diocese, to contact sympathetic Catholics and others, and to seek to influence Tracy. The bishop rebuffed their approaches. Tracy wrote to Cabirac in April 1964, "As I indicated to you previously, I will contact you whenever I deem it necessary to seek your services. At the present time, I have no plans for

²⁹"A Syllabus On Racial Justice," and memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Sister Mary Peter, December 10, 1965, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

³⁰*The Louisiana Weekly*, press clipping dated April 4, 1964, box 6, folder 10, series 33, NCCIJR; "Fr. Powell named to Rome post," *Clarion Herald*, press clipping dated September 25, 1969, box 6, folder 11, *ibid*; memorandum, Jack Sisson to Matt Ahmann, "Visit to Baton Rouge, May 30, 1964," June 1, 1964, box 3, folder 10, series 11, *ibid*.

contact with the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice."³¹

Even without the NCCIJ's assistance, diocesan leaders continued to promote Catholic acceptance of change. In June 1964, the *Catholic Commentator* took advantage of Brotherhood Sunday to remind its readers of the "universal law of charity and its very pertinent applications in the matter of racial justice." In making its appeal the editorial cited papal encyclicals, "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience," and "Bishop Tracy's Notebook" for June 14, 1963. The paper often received angry letters for its support of racial justice, but it declined to publish them.³²

After Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Bishop Tracy joined Louisiana's other Catholic prelates in issuing a statement urging compliance as a matter of patriotism, duty, "charity, understanding and loyal obedience to the laws of the country." While they maintained that "the root of the racial problem is religious and moral," the prelates also believed in the necessity of legislation. "While neither the Civil Rights Bill nor any Act of Congress can legislate morality," they stated, "it can nevertheless remove and even expunge the causes of past injustices and discriminatory practices."³³

At the end of August 1964, Catholic high schools in East Baton Rouge Parish desegregated their eleventh and twelve grades as planned. Although the Catholic press reported that desegregation took place peacefully, some incidents subsequently occurred. St. Joseph's Academy admitted four African American girls who, Sisson reported in May 1965, "seem to be completely integrated," but two black children who had "attended Catholic High were driven out of the school" by harassment.³⁴

³¹Robert E. Tracy to Henry Cabirac, Jr., April 27, 1964 (quotation), box 6, folder 11, John P. Sisson to J. D. De Blieux, June 1, 1964, John P. Sisson to Aubry Osborn, June 2, 1964, box 6, folder 12, series 33, NCCIJR; memorandum, Jack Sisson to Matt Ahmann, "Visit to Baton Rouge, May 30, 1964," June 1, 1964, box 3, folder 10, series 11, NCCIJR.

³²"Charity and Civil Rights," *Commentator*, June 26, 1964 (quotations); "The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File.

³³"La. Prelates Urge Lawful Compliance," *Commentator*, July 10, 1964.

³⁴"4 High Schools Are Integrated," *Southwest Louisiana Register*, September 10, 1964; memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Matt [Ahmann], "Department of Education

In May 1965, Tracy issued a pastoral letter to update his earlier column in the June 14, 1963, *Catholic Commentator*. He argued that during the previous three years, because of its recent formation and the need to educate Catholics about race relations, the diocese had "moved into the area of racial adjustment with a certain amount of caution and reserve, taking into account the powerful emotions at work on this question." However, given the passage of "due time for whatever emotional adjustment was needed," the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Second Vatican Council's pronouncement on race, Catholics should now prepare "prayerfully, for the fact that within the near future no Catholic door will any longer be closed to any Catholic person." Tracy's pastoral letter focused primarily on parochial schools, stating that "We will simply move with the public schools in most cases, but there will be other cases in which we will simply have to move ahead of them, as we judge best."³⁵

The letter also addressed segregation and racial discrimination in other Catholic institutions. Tracy declared: "Our churches, of course, have always been open to persons of all races, but let us clearly affirm once again that all our Catholic people have the right to seat themselves, without hindrance, wherever they desire in our churches." By implication, he acknowledged that blacks were often segregated in those majority white or mixed churches that would admit them. Diplomatically, Tracy affirmed that "all our Catholic associations and societies have long been open to all our Catholic people, although we acknowledge that we have still a long way to go before popular feeling can match the idealism of our laws." A discrepancy existed between principle and practice.³⁶

Tracy's letter followed a federal order to accelerate desegregation of public schools in East Baton Rouge Parish. In June 1965, he issued a pastoral letter announcing that Catholic schools in the entire diocese would open their doors in September to all races for at least their first and second grades in the case of elementary schools, and the ninth through twelfth grades of high schools. The move put Catholic school desegregation one grade

instructions to local school districts," May 12, 1965 (quotations), box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

³⁵Tracy, "Full Text of Bishop Tracy's Pastoral on Racial Justice" (quotations).

³⁶Ibid.; LeFebvre interview.

ahead of the public schools in East Baton Rouge Parish, and it covered a wider area. Tracy's plan envisioned complete parochial school desegregation by the fall of 1967. The bishop argued that school desegregation was "our Christian duty," and he expressed hope that "all schools—public and private—in our diocese, will now move to comply with the Civil Rights Act." But in New Roads a substantial number of white parents took their children out of a Catholic school after desegregation, and there were white withdrawals elsewhere, mostly to place children in the still largely segregated public school system.³⁷

The extent to which Tracy acted in order for Catholic schools to be in compliance with the Civil Rights Act and therefore eligible for federal funds is unclear, but this seems likely to have been a factor in his decision making. He certainly was quick to involve the diocese in applying for federal antipoverty funds to improve the education and skills of the poor through local programs of action. Reporting on those activities in 1965, he wrote "the diocese this year has taken every advantage of the opportunities afforded by the 'War on Poverty' to initiate programs benefiting mainly Negro people in the four counties [parishes] of the diocese in which our Catholic Negro population is mainly concentrated."³⁸

Apart from his actions on schools and poverty, Tracy also sought to tackle discrimination in Catholic associations. In June 1965, he reached agreement with the State Court of the Catholic Daughters of America and with the Knights of Columbus State Jurisdiction that they would not practice racial discrimination in their membership policies.³⁹

The *Catholic Commentator*, for its part, continued to address racial issues. In the summer of 1965, it published a series of articles by Dr. James R. Oliver, a Lafayette-based Catholic and president of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations. The

³⁷Bennie W. Heflin, "Bishop Tracy Details Plan to Open 'Schools to All' by 1967," and Robert E. Tracy, "School Plan," *Commentator*, June 11, 1965 (quotations); LeFebvre interview.

³⁸*Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1966, 7, Josephite Archives. The diocese later reported that "The programs in East Baton Rouge and Ascension were pretty much scuttled by political devices. . . ." "The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File.

³⁹"The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File.

paper also discussed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which suspended literacy tests in states or counties in which less than 50 percent of the voting age population had voted in the 1964 presidential election or had been registered to vote then. An editorial noted that Louisiana had applied literacy tests in a racially biased manner and argued that such tests were, in any case, no determinant of good government. The paper concluded:

Has there been discrimination in voting registration because of race or color in Louisiana? Yes, it cannot be denied. Has the literacy test been an instrument by which this discrimination has been fostered? Yes, of this also there can be no doubt. Is the Voting Rights Bill of 1965, a wise remedy to correct such discrimination? That, dear reader, is at the moment an unanswerable question.⁴⁰

While the *Catholic Commentator* maintained its criticism of racial discrimination, Tracy welcomed the appointment of Harold R. Perry, SVD, the first African American to be made a Catholic bishop in the United States in the twentieth century, as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans. At Perry's consecration in January 1966, Tracy preached a sermon in which he noted that Perry's "appointment to the episcopacy has brought immense encouragement and joy to the Negro people of our country—both Catholic and non-Catholic—as they continue their well-ordered struggle for simple justice."⁴¹

Apart from endorsing the civil rights movement, Tracy monitored progress in his own diocese. In March 1966, he claimed that "we have now completed our program of opening all

⁴⁰James R. Oliver, "Our Human Relations," *Commentator*, August 20, 1965; James R. Oliver, "Betterment of Human Relations Called 'Must' For State Survival," *ibid.*, August 27, 1965; "What the Rights Bill Is," *ibid.*, August 27, 1965 (quotation). J. D. De Blieux helped form the Louisiana Council on Human Relations in 1964 and also served on its advisory board. "The Louisiana Council on Human Relations Constituent Assembly," July 11, 1964, "Louisiana Council on Human Relations," newsletter vol. 1, no. 1, n.d., 4, box 6, folder 8, series 33, NCCIJR.

⁴¹"Sermon by the Most Rev. Robert E. Tracy, D.D., Bishop of Baton Rouge, at the Consecration of the Most Rev. Harold R. Perry, S.V.D., Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans on Thursday, January 6, 1966, 10:00 a. m., in the Basilica of St. Louis, New Orleans, La.," *Divine Word Messenger*, 43 (January-February 1966): 18 (quotation), 21, 23-4, 26-7; Newell Schindler, "Bishop Perry is consecrated as Auxiliary of New Orleans," *Texas Catholic Herald* (Houston edition), January 7, 1966.

our Catholic institutions, organizations and activities to all our Catholic people." However, the bishop recognized that the absence of discriminatory policies did not in itself ensure integration. Consequently, in July he directed that new employees in Catholic parishes, schools, institutions, and diocesan offices must be chosen according to ability, noting that the Catholic Church should at least follow federal practices in this regard. But the diocese encountered severe difficulties in recruiting qualified African Americans for supervisory and clerical jobs because of the legacy of the poorer education they had experienced in segregated public and Catholic schools.⁴²

Aware that most white and black Catholic children continued to attend separate schools, Tracy adopted a new approach to parochial school desegregation. In 1966, he closed four of the diocese's seven African American Catholic schools. They were located in Plaquemine, Donaldsonville, Convent, and Napoleonville. The bishop defended the action as "a step toward the elimination of racial barriers" on the assumption that "the Negro children will now attend former white schools" and because "the Negro schools which were closed hardly deserved the name of school at all."⁴³

The closures were also prompted by a desire to accelerate school integration in order to satisfy requirements for continued federal funding stipulated by the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Tracy explained in February 1967:

We wish to state that we fully agree with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that the constant association of Negro people exclusively with persons of their own race, if perpetuated, will undoubtedly work against the aims of racial justice. Therefore, our motive in adhering to the [HEW] guidelines is not simply that of receiving federal assistance for our

⁴²"Clergy Bulletin," vol. 2, no. 15, p. 3 (quotation), vol. 2, no. 35 (July 1, 1966), memorandum, John Kennedy to Robert E. Tracy, "Policies of the Diocese relative to the employment of Negroes," n.d., "Historical Vertical File.

⁴³*Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1967, 7-11 (quotations), Josephite Archives; "The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File.

school children but of achieving a full measure of Christlike brotherhood among all our Catholic people.⁴⁴

The measures Tracy took proved sufficient to meet HEW regulations. In June 1967, HEW found the Diocese of Baton Rouge in compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "on the basis of our review of the progress already made in the areas of student and faculty desegregation, as well as that contemplated for the school year 1967-68." Consequently, "participation of students and teachers from the diocesan system in services under federally assisted programs" would continue, provided the diocese managed "to make and implement further plans directed toward the elimination of all vestiges of the dual school system." Accordingly, in November the Diocesan School Board Office instructed its schools to increase efforts to recruit African American teachers, but it found that they would not accept Catholic school salaries that lagged behind those in the public system.⁴⁵

A small advance in African American Catholic representation came in 1967, when Fr. Elmer Powell was elected president of the mostly white Baton Rouge Ministerial Association. Powell was the organization's first Catholic president.⁴⁶

About 70 percent of the diocese's Catholic priests were local people, with the remainder largely originating from France and Germany. Father LeFebvre remembered that regardless of place of origin, younger priests tended to support desegregation and Tracy's actions on race, while "in many cases the older priests resisted." Tracy, LeFebvre recalled, also had "a good rapport with non-Catholic black leaders" and hosted them at St. Joseph's, the Catholic cathedral. In 1967, the diocese built the Catholic Life Center at its headquarters in the city of Baton Rouge. According to the *Catholic Commentator*, "The Main Auditorium

⁴⁴"Louisiana Schools," *Documentary Service* [Press, Department, U. S. Catholic Conference], February 9, 1967, folder 707.2, Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Charleston, Charleston, SC.

⁴⁵Harold Howe II to Robert E. Tracy, June 9, 1967 (quotations), box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR; "State Catholic School Desegregation Cleared By U. S. Office of Education," *Southwest Louisiana Register*, July 20, 1967; "The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File.

⁴⁶Memorandum, Jack [Sisson] to Peg, May 16, 1967, and attached press clipping, dated May 12, 1967, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR.

at the Catholic Life Center was Bishop Tracy's answer to discrimination directed to Catholics who were African American. At the Catholic Life Center, Bishop Tracy could invite all of the people of the diocese, regardless of skin color, to come together to dialogue, to dine, to develop their intellect."⁴⁷

When civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, in April 1968, the Rev. T. J. Jemison, pastor of Mount Zion First Baptist Church, wanted the Baton Rouge Ministerial Association to hold a memorial service at his church because King had once preached there. However, influenced by Tracy's good relations with black leaders and his desegregation efforts, the association held a King memorial service at St. Joseph's Cathedral. At the end of April, Louisiana State University's Catholic Student Center also hosted a three day interdenominational, biracial conference dedicated to King.⁴⁸

Shortly after King's murder, Tracy announced that the diocese would set aside 10 percent of income raised for the Diocesan Development Program—about \$40,000—for developmental resources to help the poor and underprivileged, in addition to the diocese's existing budget for charitable causes. In May, the diocese announced the establishment of an Office of Social Action, under Fr. Elmer Powell, which would oversee programs funded by the 10 percent tithe. The new office aimed to give the neediest people immediate help, promote social justice, seek government and private grants to help the poor, and take an ecumenical approach. It devoted most of its efforts to housing.⁴⁹

Also in 1968, Tracy extended the strategy of gradually eliminating African American parochial schools to include "attempting to phase out all-Negro institutions wherever this is possible." However, the policy was not to be applied in all cases. The bishop explained:

⁴⁷LeFebvre interview (first and second quotations); Greene interview; "Bishop Tracy installed 45 years ago," *Commentator*, November 8, 2006 (third quotation).

⁴⁸"The Record Of The Diocese Of Baton Rouge In Undertaking Special Work On Behalf Of The Negroes Of The Community," Historical Vertical File; untitled, *Commentator*, May 3, 1968.

⁴⁹"Diocese adopts 'tithing' plan," *Clarion Herald*, April 18, 1968; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1969, 7-10, January 1970, 7-10, Josephite Archives; "Father Powell Named to Head Social Action," *Commentator*, May 3, 1968; "Provisional Board Is Established for Social Responsibility," *ibid.*, May 10, 1968.

Where the good of souls depends upon an institution, even though it be all-Negro, the diocese finds it necessary to continue the operation of such a project, or even to institute new all-Negro institutions, exclusive of parishes. Thus, a new catechetical center is going up at St. Paul's Parish in the Eden Park area of the city of Baton Rouge, although the normal expectation is that its clients will be almost exclusively Negro and the same is true of the new Catholic student center at Southern University.⁵⁰

Secular developments continued to influence parochial school desegregation policy. In December 1969, the U. S. Supreme Court dismissed appeals of federal court-ordered desegregation plans by thirty-four Louisiana school districts, and in January 1970 it ordered the state's public school districts, after years of token desegregation, to complete integration by February 1. Some white parents responded by withdrawing their children from public schools and enrolling them in private schools to escape desegregation. Integration of the state's public schools saw approximately one third of African American children in schools that were predominately white. In January 1970, Tracy joined with Louisiana's other Catholic prelates in issuing a statement that appealed for Louisianians to support the public schools as essential for "the social welfare of all the people" and their living standards. The prelates claimed "there is no conflict between public and parochial schools" since "the aid which is sought for children in parochial and other long established non-public schools will aid the public schools, relieving them of tremendous financial and housing obligations."⁵¹

On February 18, Tracy announced guidelines designed to prevent the diocese's Catholic schools from becoming or appearing to become "havens" for students seeking to escape public school desegregation. Tracy declared that Catholic schools should seek to achieve "a racial balance which shall be—at the very least—proportionate to the Catholic population." In schools with little extra capacity, enrollment would favor "parents of applicants who have demonstrated their support of Catholic education in the past and of black Catholics generally." Tracy affirmed that "all

⁵⁰ *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1969, 7-10, Josephite Archives.

⁵¹ Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 443-45; "Bishops Support Public Schools," *Southwest Louisiana Register*, January 22, 1970 (quotations).

Catholic schools of the diocese [shall] be open to all children and all teachers regardless of race." To ensure that whites did not displace black applicants, "a proper proportion" of the intake to the first, seventh, and ninth grades would be reserved for African American Catholic children until March 13, 1970. Tracy maintained that "the schools of the Diocese have not, as a matter of fact, become havens for students fleeing desegregated public schools," but he conceded that "it may well be that a few students may have slipped by our guard." Although he announced that "deviation from diocesan policy. . . will not be tolerated," the bishop admitted that the policy's implementation relied upon "self-enforcement."⁵²

Despite the diocese's public stand against segregation and racism, many Catholics, and some of their priests, were not receptive to the message. Ray E. Ingram, a member of St. Gerard's Parish in the city of Baton Rouge, complained in June 1970 to the *Catholic Commentator* that at the diocese's recent Priests' Congress "two resolutions on racism were tabled without discussion by the extraordinary method of a secret ballot in a closed session. The 'silent majority' did not want the resolutions to be read from the floor, let alone discussed." Despite diocesan policy, some priests allowed white Catholic children whose parents had withdrawn them from desegregated parochial schools to re-enter them now that the public schools in which they had been enrolled were integrated.⁵³

Nevertheless, the diocese tried to ensure genuine integration in its parochial schools by adopting a policy in 1970 of pairing schools "in which formerly there were separate white and black schools in the same community," in order to overcome continued *de facto* segregation. Problems sometimes occurred. In the city of Baton Rouge, the diocese found that if St. Agnes, a white school, were paired with St. Francis Xavier, a black school, whites would attend neither, so that, Tracy wrote, "we would wind up with two totally black schools."⁵⁴

Tracy discovered that African Americans in New Roads objected to the unequal nature of a pairing plan that would place

⁵²"Bishop Tracy announces guidelines for school admittance in diocese," *Commentator*, February 27, 1970 (quotations).

⁵³Ray E. Ingram to the *Commentator*, June 12, 1970; LeFebvre interview.

⁵⁴*Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1971, 7-20, Josephite Archives.

all children "in new school buildings at St. Mary's," a traditionally white school. The black community would not accept pairing, the bishop noted, "unless half the children are placed in the sub-standard classrooms at St. Augustine's," an African American school.⁵⁵ Unable to resolve the conflict and recognizing "fully the cultural and social needs of the entire community," the Diocesan Board of Education decided in December 1970 to defer action and leave the two schools fully intact with open admissions policies. The diocese eventually paired the two schools. Tracy wrote in January 1973 that their pairing "which two years ago was regarded as a powder keg, has turned out, on the contrary, to be an example of the successful pairing of black and white schools."⁵⁶

Tracy was unable to resolve the impasse in the city of Baton Rouge at what the diocese had named the St. Agnes-St. Francis Xavier School, however. The bishop reported in 1974 that the diocese had converted the St. Agnes building "into an integrated vocational rehabilitation school, whereas St. Francis Xavier School building houses an entirely black student body since white students cannot be compelled to attend."⁵⁷

Tracy resigned his office on March 21, 1974, at the age of sixty-four. His successor Joseph Sullivan, appointed in August, reported in January 1975 that "the racial situation which was characterized by a number of severe upheavals in 1970-73 in connection with the pairing of white and black schools and which eliminated the last vestiges of 'dualism' in our Catholic community, has now become more stabilized."⁵⁸

Nevertheless, in the city of Baton Rouge and some other parts of the diocese black and white Catholics remained largely separated from one another by residence and by church and school attendance. Many white Catholics remained unwilling to send their children to schools with any significant number of African

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶"New Roads School System Amalgamation is Deferred," *Commentator*, December 11, 1970 (first quotation); *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1973, 7-11 (second quotation), Josephite Archives.

⁵⁷*Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1974, 7-11 (quotation), Josephite Archives.

⁵⁸"Diocese of Baton Rouge" website; *Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1975, 7-11 (quotation), Josephite Archives.

American students. Black Catholics became increasingly unwilling to sacrifice traditionally black schools and churches for the sake of integration, which was more often achieved in principle than in practice and had begun to seem futile. Their reluctance reflected not only a feeling that African Americans would be unwelcome in traditionally white Catholic schools and churches, but also a growing commitment to maintaining black Catholic institutions as centers of the black community and as places in which a burgeoning sense of black Catholic distinctiveness could be expressed and celebrated.⁵⁹

Sullivan's reflections on the diocese in January 1976 indicated a continued, if lessened, separation between black and white Catholics, but also a paternalistic approach toward African Americans. The bishop wrote: "Today we find our clergy and dedicated lay leaders working with the blacks in a more integrated situation. However, there remain isolated localities predominantly black. Hence, we must list eight churches serving predominantly black parishes."⁶⁰

His predecessor's gradual approach to removing racial discrimination from Catholic institutions had often frustrated integrationist Catholics, who believed that Tracy could have achieved more and done it sooner. Bishop Tracy believed that white Catholics had to be educated and prepared for change by the Church and that to act ahead of, or much faster, than secular desegregation would produce stronger white lay resistance. Conceivably more immediate and extensive desegregation efforts, such as those advocated by the NCCIJ, might have produced greater practical integration of Catholic institutions, because most Catholics, at least in the 1960s, would obey their bishop even when they disagreed with him. When Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans began to desegregate in 1962, two years after an initial step by the public system, the *Catholic Commentator* reported that the vast majority of Catholics continued to send their children to the archdiocese's parochial schools, notwithstanding a white Catholic boycott in Buras, a partial boycott in Westwego, and the excommunication of three

⁵⁹New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, January 14, 1969; Lisa D. Delpit, "Act Your Age, Not Your Color," in *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools*, eds. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michèle Foster (New York, 1996), 116-21, 123.

⁶⁰*Our Negro and Indian Missions*, January 1976, 18-20 (quotation), Josephite Archives.

defiant segregationists. Parish income in the archdiocese also continued to increase despite integration.⁶¹

Immediate and full Catholic school desegregation in the Diocese of Baton Rouge might have produced a new generation of Catholics, at ease with integration, who would have furthered Catholic interracialism. A more even-handed amalgamation of black and white Catholic schools and parishes than the diocese pursued might also have lessened, or perhaps prevented, a rising African American Catholic commitment to black institutions and the creation of a black liturgy in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

Against such possibilities has to be weighed the fact that Tracy encountered some white Catholics who refused to send their children to desegregated schools, as in the case of Baton Rouge's St. Agnes-St. Francis Xavier School, and he could not compel attendance. Similarly, the diocese could not force white Catholics to live among African Americans, which had a direct bearing on the prospects for genuine integration of churches and schools. Although most Catholics might accept the bishop's authority and not disobey him directly, they could find means to circumvent desegregation, such as changing their place of residence and hence their church or school, or leaving the parochial school system altogether. The increasing commitment of many African American Catholics to black institutions and to the development of a black liturgy was also a national phenomenon with more than just local roots. And, in any case, many black Catholics did not want to lose the churches they had supported and which had nurtured and sustained them and their families, often for decades. While he could have acted sooner or more widely in desegregating parochial schools, Tracy's policy of tying his actions quite closely to secular change was one pursued by many Catholic bishops in the Deep South (and also in some other southern dioceses) because they knew that the region's whites had a strong preference for segregation.⁶²

⁶¹John P. Sisson to Robert E. Tracy, November 2, 1964, box 6, folder 11, series 33, NCCIJR; *Commentator* reported in June 1963 that "The 72,337 students enrolling to attend Catholic schools [in the Archdiocese of New Orleans] next fall compares to a registration of 73,514 last spring for the 1962-63 school year," Newell Schindler, "Studies First Year of N.O. Integration," *Commentator*, June 7, 1963.

⁶²Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York, 1966), 278-81.

Tracy was committed to ending racial discrimination and segregation in the diocese and to educating white Catholics about the necessity of accepting integration, equal rights, and racial equality. He ended official segregation in parochial schools, supported civil rights legislation and public school desegregation, and attempted to bring integration to Catholic churches, schools, and other diocesan institutions. But his efforts were quite often met by white lay, and some clerical, resistance or indifference, and for a long time he failed to appreciate the preference of many African American Catholics for their own institutions and for equity in school amalgamation. When Tracy left office in 1974, most African American and white Catholics continued to live largely separate lives and to attend different Catholic institutions, despite the bishop's efforts to integrate Catholicism in the diocese.